

Development is a Myth: Reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* as a Postcolonial Eco-Fable for the Age of Anthropocene

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine how Amitav Ghosh in his latest literary work *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2023) questions the ideas of development which are completely borrowed from the Western colonial extractive models. At the heart of Ghosh's fable is a "Living mountain", called the *Mahaparbat*, which is a source of sustenance for the indigenous people living in the Valley. The indigenous people highly revered the Great Mountain. None of the indigenous people inhabiting the Valley ever dared to set foot on the slopes of the Great Mountain. It was told by their ancestors that the *Mahaparbat* would protect them only if they told stories, sang, and danced for it – "but always from a distance". But an environmental crisis unfolds when a group of people from outside – the 'Anthropoi', starts to climb the forbidden peaks, out of their eagerness to explore and exploit the *Mahaparbat*. The crisis turns into a catastrophe when eventually the indigenous people also join the race of greed with the 'Anthropoi', mistaking exploitation as development. The present paper thereby attempts to analyze Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* as a postcolonial eco-fable that shows how the promised development is a myth and nothing but a disguised form of neo-colonialism.

Keywords: development, Anthropocene, environmental crisis, neo-colonialism, postcolonial, eco-fable

There was nothing to be done, but to keep on climbing. And so we did, but with heavy hearts now, for we could not forget that with every step we took we were advancing towards our doom.

Amitav Ghosh, *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times*

The Jnanpith awardee author, Amitav Ghosh has grabbed global attention as an eminent climate thinker after the publication of the

insightful non-fiction *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* in 2016. After *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh has published *Gun Island: A Novel* (2019), *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), and *Jungle Nama* (2021), wherein all three works he distinctly addresses the issue of global climate change. Amitav Ghosh right now is leaving no stone unturned to show how as an author one can respond to the crisis of climate change and environmental degradation. As a litterateur and climate thinker he is trying to capture the crisis of global climate change in literary language. Amitav Ghosh believes in the power of stories. He believes that stories have a transformative power. As we all respond emotionally to stories, the emotional stimulations generated by stories have a transformational capability. Environment-centric stories are thus potentially a way to make readers imaginatively engage with the present environmental crisis. Environment-centric narratives can help to facilitate conversations about environmental crises among its readers, which in turn might help guide future decisions. Amitav Ghosh's recently published book comprising only 39 pages, titled *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2023), is one such kind of environment-centric narrative that has the potential to make us imaginatively engage with the ecological crisis of the age of Anthropocene. In my paper, I therefore attempt to analyze Ghosh's environment-centric narrative *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2023) as a postcolonial eco-fable for the age of Anthropocene that counters the western extractive idea of development.

First, we have to understand why I am referring to this text as a postcolonial eco-fable. To understand this, first I would like to draw your attention to the definition of colonialism given by Elleke Boehmer in his book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (1995). According to Bohemer "colonialism is a settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources and an attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of the occupied land often by force" (Bohemer 2). This definition indicates the fact that colonialism and ecological aspects are intimately related to each other. Colonialism cannot be understood without understanding the ecology or ecosystem that the colonizers try to transform, control, disturb or disrupt.

Now let me explain what is postcolonial? To explain postcolonial I shall fall back on the definition of the term postcolonial given by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their phenomenal book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989):

We use the term 'post-colonial'... to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. We also suggest that it is most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted. (Ashcroft 2)

So, postcolonial is the continuity of colonial means of production or controlling lives. The kind of life we live today is a direct continuity but a highly transformed form of our colonial past. Thus we can say that the postcolonial is a continuation of the colonial modes with a disruption. Hence the way it is impossible to talk about colonialism without an understanding of the ecological disruptions, in a similar manner, it is impossible to understand postcolonial condition without understanding how some of our most useful resources that we use on an everyday basis like land, air, water, and food are politicized or strategically deprived.

So a new branch of study named *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* emerges where we find an alliance between postcolonial and environmental studies. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in their landmark book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010) elaborates on the relationship between postcolonial and environmental studies by foregrounding that:

Postcolonial studies have come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically – and persistently – depend. Not only were other people often regarded as part of nature – and thus treated instrumentally as animals – but also they were forced or coopted over time into Western views of the environment, thereby rendering cultural and environmental restitution difficult if not impossible to achieve. Once invasion and settlement had been accomplished, or at least once administrative structures had been set up, the environmental impacts of Western attitudes toward human beings in the world were facilitated or reinforced by the deliberate (or

accidental) transport of animals, plants and peoples throughout the European empires, instigating widespread ecosystem change under conspicuously unequal power regimes. (Huggan, Tiffin 6)

Huggan and Tiffin therefore talk about the impossibility of discussing modern imperialism without paying attention to the massive ecological destruction that is at its root. Even Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) describes imperialism as "...an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control" (Said 77). One of the central objectives of postcolonial ecocriticism to date has been to contest the Western extractive ideologies of development. The tragedy of contemporary South Asia is that the kind of development that we seek today is completely borrowed from Western colonial models. We have to understand that postcolonial ecocritics are not against development or anti-development. They are voicing against the blatant social and environmental abuses that continue to be perpetrated in the name of development. The Western extractive idea of development is just a myth or rhetoric. It is simply a myth of gigantism. Such a development cannot deliver anything that it promises. Hence postcolonial ecocriticism according to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin is "...broadly counter-developmental, rather than explicitly anti-developmental...which is committed to recognizing the existence of alternative social and environmental knowledge that are neither acknowledged nor necessarily understood by development experts in the West" (Huggan, Tiffin 20).

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2023) is such a cautionary postcolonial ecological fable that is countering the extractive developmental ideas propagated by the West. At the heart of Ghosh's fable is a "Living mountain" – "...an immense, snowy mountain, whose peak was almost always wreathed in clouds" (Ghosh 7), called the *Mahaparbat*. This *Mahaparbat* is a source of sustenance for the indigenous people living in the Himalayan Valley. The indigenous people highly revered the Great Mountain. None of the indigenous people inhabiting the Valley ever dared to set foot on the slopes of the Great Mountain. The people of the Valley believed that "of all the world's mountains, (theirs) was the most alive" (Ghosh 7). It was told by their ancestors that the *Mahaparbat*

would protect them only if they told stories, sang, and danced for it – “but always from a distance” (Ghosh 7). Every day the Valley people got proof that the “Mountain was a living being” that cared for them. There was a tree that grew only in that Valley and “produced things that were so miraculous” (Ghosh 8) that was referred to as the “Magic Tree” (Ghosh 7). The flowers of the Magic Tree produced flavourful honey, the fruits were delicious, and its roots nurtured rare mushrooms but the nuts that lay within the fruits were the miraculous produce of the tree. The nuts were known for their medicinal uses and these miraculous nuts attracted traders from the Lowlands. An environmental crisis unfolds across the Valley when a group of traders, called the ‘Anthropoi’, comes from the Lowland in search of medicinal nuts. The ‘Anthropoi’, starts to climb the forbidden peaks, out of their eagerness to explore and exploit the *Mahaparbat*. For the ‘Anthropoi’ the *Mahaparbat* is just like any other mountain that produces “valuable trade goods” (Ghosh 11). The *Mahaparbat* does not hold any emotional and sacred value for the ‘Anthropoi’. Hence the ‘Anthropoi’ belittles the indigenous people’s local beliefs and knowledge about the Great Mountain. They even inflict a sense of insecurity on the indigenous people. We see the ‘Anthropoi’ saying to the native people of the Valley that: “...the reasons why they were so much stronger than us (Valley-folk) was that their ideas were universal – unlike the false, local beliefs that circulated amongst us (the) Valley-folk” (Ghosh 26). They laughed at the native people’s inherited ideas of the Mountain’s sacredness, saying “That was all ignorant, pagan superstition” (Ghosh 26).

In Ghosh’s story the ‘Anthropoi’ completely resembles the white colonizers from the West. They behave exactly like the British colonizers who tried their best to make us believe that they were only the enlightened ones. Hence it is the white colonizer’s moral duty to bring Western civilization to the less enlightened populace of the East. The ‘Anthropoi’ does not try to understand the environmental knowledge of the Valley people. The *Mahaparbat* is like any other mountain for the ‘Anthropoi’ that just needs to be “...climbed if only the climbers were strong enough, intelligent enough, resolute enough” (Ghosh 26). Only by climbing, exploring, and extracting resources from the Great Mountain, they believed they were going to bring development to that region. This idea of the development of the

'Anthropoi' is a "disguised form of neo-colonialism" (Huggan, Tiffin 27). The primary purpose is to extract commercial benefits of the Great Mountain and in no way this development is sustainable. The story does not end with the 'Anthropoi' climbing and exploiting the Great Mountain. It ends on an even more catastrophic note when we see the indigenous Valley people also joining the race of greed with the 'Anthropoi'. The result is the mountain becomes destabilized. The combined weight of all the climbers unsettles the snow that resulting in a "series of devastating landslides and avalanches" (Ghosh 24) across the Valley. Environmental catastrophe unfolds all across the Valley. Even after realizing that the race of greed is a threat to their survival, they cannot stop because climbing the Great Mountain has become "like a drug to them" (Ghosh 30) and that eventually takes them to their doom.

So, Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2023), is a postcolonial ecological fable that critiques the neo-colonial western ideologies of development. Ghosh shows that the extractive idea of development that the 'Anthropoi' believes in is just a myth. It is a myth of gigantism that not only fails to deliver what it promises but also causes irreparable environmental catastrophe in the age of the Anthropocene. Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2023) creates a counter-developmental narrative, where the aim is to acknowledge the existence of alternative social and environmental pieces of knowledge of the natives that are never appreciated or understood by the development masters in the West. To conclude I would like to refer to an oft-quoted statement of Sundarlala Bahaguna regarding the environmental catastrophes unfolding in the Indian Himalayan belt. Bahaguna says that "the ecological crisis in the Himalayas is not an isolated event (but) has its root in the (modern) materialistic civilization (that) makes man the butcher of Earth" (Huggan and Tiffin 1). The Anthropoies from Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* quite resemble us – we who now function as the butchers of postcolonial India. But we often do not realize that we are the butchers who are poisoning the entire ecosystem at a terrifying rate in the name of development. Hence an environment-centric fable like Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* is a need of the hour that has the potential to make us imaginatively engage with the ecological crisis of the age of the Anthropocene.

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